

Coast Wrecking & Salvage Company was gone in the north nearly a month. The morning that he returned home the cables were carrying the news that on the preceding day the Isthmian Mail Steamship Company's fourteen-thousand-ton liner *Toltec*, homeward bound from Panama, had gone on the rocks of the lower Nicaragua coast. That afternoon the West Coast Company's wrecker *Electra*, with Pericles on her bridge, started south to save the *Toltec*, if possible.

IT was the end of April when the *Toltec* put her battered bows through the Golden Gate in tow of the *Electra*. On the liner's bridge stood Pericles, and beside him Royal Jessup, her commander, looking all of sixty years instead of forty-five and in his prime. As the harbor opened up ahead Jessup said in a hopeless sort of way:

"Well, I suppose this will be the last time I'll ever come through the old Gate on the bridge of a ship."

"Steady there, Jessup!" warned Pericles, pausing in the act of leveling a glass at a liner coming up astern. "Stick your jaw out. Your company people will be coming aboard in a few minutes. And remember your little girl. Got to meet her with a brave face, above all."

"Oh, I'm not letting go," answered Jessup, reading Pericles' thoughts and smiling bravely; but nevertheless he was wondering whether it would not have been far better if O'Brien had not come upon him that night two months before when he stood in his room under the bridge, his eyes fixed on his daughter Martha's picture and a pistol at his head.

"Hello!" exclaimed Pericles, glass on the liner astern. "Here comes the *Granada*!"

Jessup took the glass, and for several seconds held it on the Pacific Company's liner. Turning to Pericles he said, "I think, Pericles, that I'd never have got through those black days and nights of mine down south if it hadn't been for the story you told me about young Jordan. He has known real trouble, hasn't he?"

"The kind that eats out the heart, the bitterest," answered Pericles, and just then a fleet of launches darted out from the shore; and in one of them came Martha, Royal Jessup's daughter, and the giant salvor saw that she was as supple as the water over the side, and fairer a thousand times than her photograph which hung in the room of the *Toltec*'s commander.

EVENING of the day following was closing in rapidly as Royal Jessup and his daughter left the offices of the West Coast Wrecking & Salvage Company. The government inquiry to fix the responsibility for the stranding of the *Toltec* had been peremptorily set for the next day, and the three had been going over the evidence in the case.

As the door of his private office closed upon the Jessups, Pericles O'Brien shook his head doubtfully. He believed Royal Jessup's story of the strong and inexplicable current that had put the *Toltec* off her course and upon the rocks; but would the government inspectors give it credence? As Jessup himself had said more than once in bitterness that afternoon, it was a defense that required "a preponderance of corroboration." In the midst of this moment of doubt Benny Jordan was ushered into the room by an office boy, and as Pericles took the hand of the *Granada*'s commander and welcomed him he saw in his dark eyes that look of pain which had been there that raw December morning when they had met in California-st. outside Merchants' Exchange.

It was nearly two hours later when Captain Benjamin Jordan of the liner *Granada* went out into the night alone from the offices of the West Coast Wrecking & Salvage Company. And for an hour afterward Pericles O'Brien remained at his desk pondering what a marvelous and infinite thing human nature was.

THE inquiry began at nine o'clock the next morning. By eleven all of Jessup's officers had given their testimony and Jessup had been sworn and was finishing his story.

"And is that all you have to tell us?" sneered the young assistant district attorney, Gleason by name, who was examining in behalf of the government.

Jessup nodded, and the examiner went on:

"You were two days out of Panama, with fair weather ruling until about ten o'clock of the night of the stranding. Then it turned 'very' black, with heavy rain squalls, and you took the bridge, remaining there until she struck. It was 'thick,' I think you called it. And you were 'confident' of your position because of your noonday reckoning and the 'observed' hourly run thereafter. And you had made 'due allowance' for the Mexican current, whose set along the coast at that point is fixed by the charts at anywhere from eighteen to twenty-four knots a day. And now you come here and ask us to believe that on this particular night that current suddenly went wild and made anywhere from thirty to thirty-five knots and landed your ship high and dry?"

"I ask the inspectors to believe that," answered Jessup, endeavoring to control his voice.

"Oh, by the way, how many passengers were you carrying?"

"Four hundred and eight—and not one lost, not a life!" and Jessup's voice rang with pride. As he rendered this answer his gaze found his daughter's, where, leaning forward tensely, she sat beside Pericles.

"That's all!" snapped Gleason, and Jessup stepped from the witness stand amid a murmuring of many voices.

"Any more witnesses to call?" asked the examiner as the Captain passed him.

Jessup sent a helpless glance toward Pericles; but the giant's head was turned away in the direction of the entrance to the inquiry room.

"Have we any other witnesses, Pericles?" whispered Jessup, crossing to the salvor's side.

"No; I think that's all—" he was answering, when he stopped with a sharp intake of breath, caught Jessup by an arm, and pressed him into a seat behind his daughter.

THE tall form of Benny Jordan was looming through the doorway. Head held high, his smooth, dark face pale and set, he walked down the aisle leading to the witness stand, with glance neither to right nor to left. As he stepped on the small platform he raised his right hand and turned toward the two inspectors.

"I wish to be sworn in this inquiry," said he, and as

this statement went out to the audience there followed a stir of expectation.

"What does he know about it? Who is he?" asked Martha Jessup and her father as one.

But Pericles answered neither of them. His gaze was fixed on Jordan, receiving the oath.

"My name is Benjamin Jordan," began this unexpected witness, and as this name went through the inquiry room there was a murmur.

Jordan paused slightly; but it was not because of the murmuring. Samuel Ashton, vice president and general manager of the Pacific Navigation Company, had just taken up a position inside the entrance door. Pericles saw Ashton too, and knew not what to think.

"I have been a licensed master mariner for twelve years past," Jordan continued in a calm, even tone and as though he had fixed in his mind every word that he meant to utter from that witness stand. "I am now thirty-three years old. On the night of February second last I was commander of the steamship *Granada* of the Pacific Navigation Company's line, bound from Panama toward San Francisco. That was the night the steamship *Toltec*, of the Isthmian line, struck on the coast of Nicaragua. The charts report a current setting to the southeastward at that point of from eighteen to twenty-four knots an hour. That night that current was making not less than a thirty-five-knot set. The *Granada* at ten P. M. was eighty-five miles to the north of the point where the *Toltec* went ashore at eleven P. M. It was very thick. I was on the bridge with my first and fourth officers. Suddenly there was a clearing ahead. I alone saw it. It came and went like the twinkling of an eye, and yet it was time enough to see the rocks ahead—not more than two ship's lengths away. Another two minutes and we should have been piled up. I signaled full speed astern with my own hands; then ordered full ahead and steered due west for ten miles, and then bore north again. In six hours that current had set us seven and three-quarters miles off our true course."

THE silence of a vault reigned throughout the inquiry room as the witness finished that statement. The assistant district attorney, who had taken a seat in front of Jordan, stood up and studied him for perhaps two seconds. Then his gaze leaped toward Pericles O'Brien in a glance of questioning sarcasm. From him to Jordan it sped, and with it this interrogation:

"Of course you are a friend of Captain Jessup's and would like to see him cleared of responsibility, his license as a master saved to him?"

"I do not know Captain Jessup, Sir."

"No? Then presumably you are a friend of his charming daughter, who sits there beside him?" and, shaking his head in negation, Jordan's dark eyes followed the examiner's pointing finger where it went toward Martha Jessup. "Don't know Miss Jessup, eh?"

"No."

"Then you must know the gentleman who sits on the other side of her and has been acting here as a sort of sea lawyer or counsel for her father—Mr. Pericles O'Brien?"

"Yes, I've known Pericles O'Brien since boyhood," answered Jordan, but without looking at the salvor. "Captain O'Brien is—I should call Pericles O'Brien my truest, my best, friend."

"Ah!" gloated Gleason, and at that very eye in the room was fixed on Pericles, even the girl's at his side, and her father's.

But the junior partner of the West Coast Wrecking & Salvage Company might have been a wooden man, so motionless did he remain.

"The *Toltec* was stranded three months ago," resumed the examiner, "and yet you have waited until the very last moment of this inquiry before coming forward to tell this remarkable story! Why did you not inform the government of your experience with this current at the time of its occurrence?"

"Because it would have meant the discovery of what I trusted, hoped, would never be known," answered Jordan steadily. "I was making my first trip as a Captain and as commander of the *Granada*, and it would have been a poor recommendation for my being kept in that position,—that I had come within a hand-breadth of losing the ship. If



"There is but one thing to do, and that is to tell the truth!"